

REGIONALISM AND THE FUNCTIONAL TRADITION IN DANISH MODERN ARCHITECTURE

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Abstract

This paper discusses the discourse on regionalism and "the functional tradition" in relation to Danish modern architecture. The concept of the functional tradition was proposed by the architect Kay Fisker (1893-1965) in his 1950 essay "Den funktionelle tradition: Indtryk af amerikansk arkitektur" (The Functional Tradition: Impressions of American Architecture) and repeated in Danish discourse on modern architecture ever since. Through his writings, Fisker reaffirmed a national narrative of Danish architecture as being peripheral in the light of contemporary trends and ideas yet shaped by a pragmatic crypto-functionalism, nested in a local building culture and hence seldomly resulting in ground-breaking works yet continuously contributing to a national building stock of relatively high quality even if formally leaning towards more or less anonymous expressions. In his own built projects, which counts numerous housing blocks in Copenhagen, healthcare and educational institutions such as Aarhus University, Fisker, one of the key protagonists of Danish twentieth-century architecture, strived for a balance between what he termed "Internationalism" and "National Romanticism" (1960), relying on local building materials and construction techniques such as brickwork and pitched roofs. Hence, the discourse as set forth in 1950 supports Fisker's own production both pre- and prospectively. Curiously, Fisker would coin his concept of "the functional tradition" through an analysis of contemporary American architecture. He thus suggested an alternative story of what modern architecture was, could, and not least ought to be (his discourse being highly normative and driven by causal argumentation and biological metaphors i.e. architectural history performing through "evolution"). According to Fisker, traditionalism is a sort of contextualism which again can be viewed as a universal principle, bringing him close to much later ideas of critical regionalism

Keywords: Regionalism, Modernism, Denmark, Kay Fisker, Functional Tradition.

Kay Fisker and "the functional tradition"

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American Architecture) and repeated in Danish discourse on modern architecture ever since. In his own built projects, which counts numerous housing blocks in Copenhagen, healthcare and educational institutions such as Aarhus University, Fisker, one of the key protagonists of Danish twentieth-century architecture, strived for a balance between what he termed "Internationalism" and "National Romanticism" (1960), relying on local building materials and construction techniques such as brickwork and pitched roofs. Hence, the discourse as set forth in 1950 supports Fisker's own production both pre- and prospectively.

Through his writings, Fisker reaffirmed a national narrative of Danish architecture as being peripheral in the light of contemporary trends and ideas yet shaped by a pragmatic crypto-functionalism, nested in a local building culture and hence seldomly resulting in ground-breaking works yet continuously contributing to a national building stock of relatively high quality even if formally leaning towards more or less anonymous expressions. As Nils-Ole Lund has argued, Fisker's written and historical work was part of a particular pedagogical and ethical project targeted at Danish architectural practice. Fisker instituted this project through his professorship at the school of architecture in Copenhagen until 1963 and through his own professional work. Borrowing a term from Manfredo Tafuri, Fisker was an *operative* historian and writer (Lund, 1993, p. 178). His writings on Danish architectural history was, as we shall see, a project of sedimentation of his own architectural ethos.

Curiously, Fisker would coin his concept of "the functional tradition" through an analysis of contemporary *American* architecture. He thus suggested an alternative story of what modern architecture was, could, and not least ought to be (his discourse being highly normative and driven by causal argumentation and biological metaphors i.e. architectural history performing through "evolution"). Fisker's 1950 essay on the functional tradition furthermore contains some interesting remarks on regionalism. The topic of the essay is American and in particular contemporary American architecture. Fisker presents this through the lens of the concept of "the functional tradition" which he borrows from the 1950 January volume of *The Architectural Review*. But he gives the concept a new meaning, adding to that of *The Architectural Review*, which was primarily concerned with how urban planning and urban design would influence future architecture. Buildings, houses, were of interest to Fisker, even if it was not the the main focus of that particular volume of *The Architectural Review*. He describes how a contemporary discourse on architecture is requesting an "*organic, spontaneous and human architecture*" but how all of this turns into mere clichés (1950, p. 2). The fact

that *The Architectural Review* coined the term functional tradition also related to a British admiration of Scandinavian architecture during the immediate post-WWII years, for instance expressed in the description of a *new empiricism* in Swedish architecture in *The Architectural Review* in 1947 (Lund, 2008, pp. 23-53). As Lund points out:

The Nordic countries had shown that it was possible to transform society step by step, and that a revolution was not necessary. Scandinavian architecture was seen as a symbol of this development, in which it was not the theories and the programmes that were crucial, but a tradition that absorbed the new ideas and re-formed them into an architecture typical of the region. (Lund, 2008, p. 28)

New empiricism meant an architecture which was sound, sensible, and locally embedded and in that sense somehow contrary to contemporary pursuits of new styles in architecture or for a new monumentality as demanded by Sigfried Giedion. In his 1950 essay, Fisker rejects these ideas, arguing that contemporary problems such as providing sufficient dwellings or public institutions should be the matter of concern for architects, not style. Fisker points to certain robust aspects of American architecture as examples to draw inspiration from, what was termed *the Bay Region style* by Lewis Mumford in 1947. Yet Fisker is critical of Mumford's description of this type of architecture as being particularly American:

It seems unfortunate and reactionary to me, that Mumford now strives to label the quiet and modest houses which characterizes this school as being *national*. It would be more natural to determine the *regional* influence on the form, and to identify parallels with architecture in other parts of the world based on similar regional preconditions for instance in Northern Europe, England, Scandinavia, and Northern Switzerland. (Fisker, 1950, p. 5, my transl.)

Yet we might note that Mumford in fact did recognize that the attitude of the architects of the Bay Region wasn't particularly national. As he stated in his column in the *New Yorker* in 1947: "The style is actually a product of the meeting of Oriental and Occidental architectural traditions, and it is far more truly a universal style than the so-called international style of the nineteen-thirties, since it permits regional adaptations and modifications." (2007, p. 291)

In his 1950 essay, Fisker provides his reader with several examples of historical and contemporary American architecture by such architects as H.H. Richardson, Louis H. Sullivan, Pietro Belluschi, Bernard Maybeck, Charles and Henry Greene, and William W.

Wurster. Fisker praises the craftsman-like and the crystalline forms of some of these houses, as well as the connection between building and landscape, furthermore pointing to the influence of Japanese architecture: "The cohesion between house and landscape might be the most significant value of the Bay Region architecture (...) (1950, p. 18, my transl.). Fisker argues that some of the contemporary houses by Richard J. Neutra and Wurster in a very beautiful way continues the functional tradition:

There is a natural homogeneity about this architecture which under the given regional conditions leads to the employment of certain materials, constructions, and forms. These houses express a living and lush idea of architecture, free of formalism, growing out of a healthy humanness and a strong and positive social understanding, the only foundation for contemporary architecture. (1950, p. 32, my transl.)

Fisker repeats some of his ideas on the regional in his lecture "Principles of Form" held at the Royal Danish Academy's School of architecture during the 1950s. In the published summary of his 1956 lecture he states in his twelfth and final lecture on "the functional tradition" that:

Architecture will always be subject to certain regionally determined formal demands; climate and mentality, the materials of the site and other conditions are very different across the globe, and each region has its own natural form of expression. Architectural form is thereby determined locally, but international, independent of coincidental, national borders. Hence in terms of functionality, the Latin, firm cubic form is exactly as right as the Nordic, free form. (1999, p. 130, my transl.)

Fisker attempts to establish a middle ground between opposites, striving for a balance between local and global by arguing for their interdependence. (See also Bendsen, 2009, pp. 155-159). Yet in his book on Danish architecture in the period 1850-1950, co-written with Knud Millech and published in 1951, Fisker and Millech identified two different tendencies in Danish architecture of the immediate past, the period 1930-50: the internationally inspired functionalists – and the functional tradition. As they write: "The international functionalism is particularly attached to the new building techniques, primarily the development of ferroconcrete (...) The domestic, functional architecture inherits substantially from tradition, including a sense of enclosed form and the textural character of materials." (Millech & Fisker, 1951, p. 6) The narrative of opposed directions in Danish modern architecture was quite influential and repeated in Tobias Faber's 1963

book on the history of Danish architecture (translated into English in 1978). As Faber stated in his introduction to the latter tendency: "The functional ideal of full relationship between form, construction and contents did, of course, fit perfectly with the practical virtues of Danish building tradition, and during the 30s many architects regarded the new ideas sympathetically (sic!) without thinking it necessary to throw tradition overboard." (Faber, 1978, p. 187)



Figure 1. Kay Fisker, Brøndbyparken, 1951. Fisker designed the masterplan, eight eight-storey building and twenty-eight three-storey buildings for this Copenhagen satellite town. The houses are surrounded by greenspace and a large central common green, taking inspiration from the English Garden City movement. Traditional Danish materials and building technique such as brick walls and pitched tile roofs are merged with prefab concrete elements. Photo by the author.

Form and ethos

In one of his last essays, "Persondyrkelse eller anonymitet" published in December 1964, just six months before his death, Fisker argues against nationalism in architecture, but for a regionalism based on climatic and technological conditions. The essay is a highly ethical statement, arguing for an "international community" typical of the post-war humanism. Significantly, Fisker's argumentation is based on biological metaphors, describing his pros as "natural" and his cons as "unhealthy":

The notion of national architecture is unhealthy. It would be more natural to replace the national architecture with a regional one. But the natural division according to climatic or other regional conditions more and more seem to vanish due to the technical expansion. In the future, constructions will be identical in - Leopoldville and Kansas City. The Ballerup Scheme [a Copenhagen suburb, MS] might as well be situated in Uganda. (1964, p. 522, my transl.)

In his essay, Fisker reacts strongly against contemporary architecture which he finds too chaotic and experimental, for, as he states, "*Architecture is order.*" (1964, p. 522, ital. in orig., my transl.) He recognizes the importance of strong personalities in architecture yet calls for attention to the mundane or what he terms *anonymous* architecture. "It is the neutral, anonymous architecture which should characterize our milieu and it is this we should struggle to improve (...) Ordinary architecture should be *anonymous* and *timeless.*" (1964, p. 522, my transl., ital. in orig.) International architectural tendencies have historically, according to Fisker, been translated into Danish, yet what characterizes Danish architecture is what he terms a "healthy naturalness" (1964, p. 524). Fisker connects this idea with functionalism, not considered as style but an ethics: "The ethics of functionalism dictates that no form is anything in itself. Form only acquires meaning due to the function it adheres to. We should still fight for this ethics." (1964, p. 526, my transl.) The goal of contemporary architecture should be to create an orderly cityscape and landscape, good dwellings and a human milieu, according to Fisker. This implied a delicate balance of difference: "We have an architectural distinctiveness which we should protect, but we must not become self-obsessed." (1964, p. 526)

Critical voices regarding the concept of the functional tradition were nevertheless already present during Fisker's lifetime. Even his own biographer, Hans Erling Langkilde, publishing the first monograph on Fisker in 1960, pointed to some of its problems. Langkilde is skeptical as to how well the term describes Fisker's own works of architecture, which according to Langkilde were really not that well-related to functionalism, yet also transcended mere traditionalism (1960, p. 102). Langkilde notes that the term "the functional tradition" is undefined and opaque but could be interpreted to mean an amalgamation of core functionalist values and formal preferences for well-defined volumes and spaces with some traditional implication. "The link might eventually prove to be a paradox (...)" Langkilde states (1960, p. 102). To Langkilde, Fisker could rather be described as "a classicist humanist".

Later authors have added to this critique of the concept. In the monograph on Fisker edited by Steffen Fisker, Johan Fisker and Kim Dirckinck-Holmfeld and published in 1993, a whole chapter was dedicated to the concept, written by Nils-Ole Lund. He starts off where Langkilde had ended in 1960, but his critique is more thorough as he situates the concept in a historical context. He further explains what Langkilde's paradox might mean: "The paradoxical is to be found in the functional tradition as well as in Fisker's own houses and is caused by the fact that it is difficult to unite the useful and the beautiful when beauty first and foremost is being defined as order." (Lund, 1993, p. 174) Thus, Fisker's will to *order* as a main aim of architecture is exactly what causes the problems and frustrations of Danish architecture, according to Lund. He proposes a modification of the concept of "the functional tradition". Since this tradition is driven by an inherently classicist will to order, as was also indicated by Langkilde in his description of Fisker as a classicist humanist, Lund would rather term it "an aesthetic-functional tradition" (1993, p. 174).

Polemically, Lund incorporates some of Fisker housing projects in his discussion of the concept of the functional tradition. He shows that Fisker's own work from the 1930s, which Fisker describes as belonging to the functional tradition, could just as well be described as belonging to an international functionalism. It leads Lund to conclude that rather than speaking of two directions, one should think of modern Danish architecture from the end of the 1920s to the early 1960s as embraced by a single current which nevertheless contains opposite ideals (1993, p. 179). At bottom line, Danish architecture is characterized by a pursuit of order and harmony, says Lund, even if it attempts to combine such an aesthetic ideal with a functional or even rational ethos: "The rationality in Danish architecture is the rationality of beauty, the belief in order and harmony is the final goal of architecture." (1993, p. 180, my transl.) Furthermore, Lund links such values of regularity and simplicity – "the dream of bourgeois classicism" – to a national identity based on similar values, of harmony and modesty (1993, pp. 180-182).

Traditional or regional?

In order to gain a fuller understanding of the roots of the notion of the functional tradition and its regional implication, we should have a brief look at Danish architecture during Fisker's formative years in the beginning of the twentieth century. One of the most significant protagonists of this period was P.V. Jensen-Klint. According to Thomas Bo Jensen, Jensen-Klint's work as an architect demonstrates a "unsentimental mixture of

tradition and technique" that would heavily influence the work of such architects as Fisker and C. F. Møller as part of Danish modernism after 1930, particularly in their buildings for Aarhus University. Jensen describes this as Jensen-Klint's "transformation machine" in which regional identity, international impulses, and social value would amalgamate (2006, p. 38). Certain architectural typologies were applied as a filter for personal and external impulses in Jensen-Klint's poetics, namely the traditional Danish farm, manor house and village church. He particularly praised the way the village church, the manor house and the farm were integrated in the landscape, describing these typologies as directly growing out of the ground. As he stated in 1909: "All three are so far from disfiguring the landscape that they quite the contrary enhance its beauty, provide it with more character, since they are balanced in terms of materials and form, colour and location." (Jensen-Klint 1909, quoted in Fisker, 1963, p. 41). Fisker, in an essay written in 1963, points out that there would be even a fourth type of building that Jensen-Klint would look out for, namely the ancient dolmen, "(...) the monument of our very landscape, nature and art in unity." (1963, p. 41). Fisker directly positions himself along the line of Jensen-Klint's architectural poetics: "The school of Klint is still alive and strong in contemporary Danish architecture. Most of us are indebted to it. I consider myself a student of Jensen-Klint (...) First and foremost, Jensen-Klint has taught us to admire the simple, the honest, the sculptural play of large volumes and the textural value of the materials." (1963, p. 80) Jensen-Klint's architecture was influenced by national-romantic tendencies as well as by the English arts and crafts movement. In his 1963 essay on Jensen-Klint, Fisker even compared Jensen-Klint's physical appearance to that of William Morris and identifies a striking resemblance, as if to thereby emphasize their kinship (1963, p. 38).

The early years of the twentieth century witnessed an increasing interest in Danish mundane/vernacular building culture, particularly amongst young architects in a reaction against the historicism taught at the Royal Academy's school of architecture. A number of students at the Royal Academy attempted to found a new school of architecture in 1902, critical of the conservative teaching. They didn't succeed but ended up taking apprenticeships with Jensen-Klint, who insisted on the measuring of old Danish architecture, publishing some of his ideas in the book *Bygmesterskolen* (The School of the Master Builder) in 1911 (Smidt, 2004, p. 322).



Figure 2. Kay Fisker and Aage Rafn, Gudhjem Railway Station, Bornholm, 1915. Fisker's first completed building project was inspired by vernacular Danish architecture as well as English arts and crafts. Photo by the author.

Another influential architect at the time, Hack Kampmann, was appointed professor at the Royal Academy in 1908, and decided in 1910-11 to divide the so-called Temple Class, in which the antique architecture was studied, into two – the Temple Class and the Danish Class, the latter addressing common buildings which had not previously been studied at the Academy (Smith, 2004, pp. 328-29). This was part of a general reaction in Danish architecture. A brochure published in connection with the national exhibition in Aarhus in 1909, "Stationsbyen" (The Railway Town) stated that: "It has not been our intention to create new, hitherto unknown forms. To the contrary, we wanted to demonstrate that certain values exist in our old domestic architecture which should not be left unacknowledged and which could answer to the requirements of the present." (Borch, 1909, no pag., quoted after Smith, 2004, p. 329, my transl.) Claus M. Smidt has furthermore pointed to the regionalism and vernacular tendencies in Kay Fisker's very first realized project, the railway stations at Bornholm (with Aage Rafn). Smidt sees in these buildings an interest in the regional and craft-based, which however was not limited to Denmark but was a European phenomenon at the time, promoted in the work of such architects as Baillie Scott, Parker & Urwin, Alfred Messel and Heinrich Tessenow (Smidt, 2004, p. 341)

Fisker would later connect such regionalism and sense of tradition with a particular ethos. In 1947, in a speech held before the Danish Academy, Fisker emphasized the ethical or programmatic aspects of functionalism, aspects which according to Fisker should survive the then widespread criticism of functionalism as a style: "Functionalism holds a moral that is eternal: the demand for functional architecture." (2008, p. 35) Fisker shows that this programme was historically situated, that many of its principles had been formed already during the nineteenth century: "In social and technical forces as well as in planning, the origins of functionalism had all been present in the nineteenth century. Only the language of form had lagged behind." (2008, p. 37) Fisker supports the critique of this language of functionalism: "Functionalism was a cleansing agent which swept over the nations like a storm, liberating and stimulating. It was necessary, but it destroyed too much. Architecture became skeletal, sterile and antiseptic. At times the whole movement seemed inhuman." (2008, p. 38) Yet a contemporary answer to this crisis is not a return to historical forms, to ornament, decoration or Beaux-Arts classicism, argues Fisker. What is needed is a further development of architecture based on the core values of functionalism, not as a style but as a programme: "(...) we should be concerned with the development of the more vigorous and human side of functional architecture: a clear and functional frame around modern existence, created with new means; further development of tradition, perhaps, but not a return to forms past and gone." (2008, p. 39)

Perspectives

In Fisker's written discourse, regionalism is part of the notion of the functional tradition. Yet how should we relate this notion and its regionalist implications to other notions of regionalism? The problem is that Fisker's descriptions of regional aspects are rather vague. But importantly, he does not propose a dichotomy between the local and the global. His regionalism is not grounded in the soil in a Heideggerian way, neither is it nationalistic. In that regard, Fisker seems to agree more with Lewis Mumford that he would acknowledge himself. A regionalism which, like Mumford's, is understood not as being opposed to the modern, not a historicist approach (Levaivre, 2003, p. 35). Liane Lefaivre has pointed out that Mumford as well did not put down a clear theory of regionalism, but that various aspects of his version of regionalism can be identified in his writings, including a rejection of historicism, attention to nature and landscape, but not in a pastoral nostalgic way, open-mindedness as regards contemporary technologies, attention to community, but not considered mono-cultural, and the rejection of an

opposition between the local and the universal (Lefaivre, 2003, pp. 35-39). As we have seen, several of these concerns were shared with Fisker, even if his version of a regional architecture tended to be more aesthetically oriented as Lund has argued. Fisker insists on difference in a time of increasing industrialization and global capitalism. A point of view shared by later advocates of regionalism such as Lefaivre and Alexander Tzonis in their critique of contemporary globalization (Lefaivre & Tzonis, 2012). According to Fisker, traditionalism is a sort of contextualism which again can be viewed as a universal principle, bringing him close to much later ideas of critical regionalism as for instance proposed by Kenneth Frampton (1983). We may also note that Frampton has pointed to the Bay Region school in his writings on critical regionalism and used the Danish architect Jørn Utzon – a student of Fisker – as an example of his critical regionalism. (1983, p. 153) Fisker's notion of the functional tradition continued in Danish architecture discourse after his death in 1965, even if he never presented it as a rigorous theory. As we have seen, it bears several similarities with other kinds of regionalism by insisting on regional differences, particularly regarding sites and materiality. Yet, Fisker's discourse on architecture also had strong aesthetic and formalistic tendencies, targeted at providing order and regularity. In this sense, it differs from late modern or deconstructivist ideas, which would confront the presumed chaos which Fisker so directly opposed, by considering it an unavoidable contemporary condition that architects might nevertheless address critically.

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